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DEPARTMENT PLS PASS TO INR/B

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SUBJECT: A BAGHDAD COMMUNIST BECOMES A SUNNI CHAMPION

Classified By: PRT Team Leader Andrew Passen for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).).

¶1. (U) This is a Baghdad PRT reporting cable.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY: A key figure has emerged on the Baghdad political scene in Subhi al-Meshadani, the lone Sunni on the Baghdad Provincial Council. Subhi, a member of the Iraqi Communist Party, has recently vaulted from the backbenches of provincial government to the forefront of the province's reconciliation efforts. Subhi has taken the lead in connecting Baghdad's outlying Sunni communities to the Shia-dominated provincial government. For disenfranchised Sunnis on the outside looking in, and for moderate Shia looking for a way to reach out, Subhi is currently Baghdad's 'go-to guy.' It remains to be seen, however, whether Subhi is being used as a 'token' Sunni to bolster a Shia agenda, or whether he has developed into a legitimate power-broker who can serve as a credible leader for a Sunni population in Baghdad sorely lacking leadership. END SUMMARY.

THE ONLY SUNNI VOICE ON THE PROVINCIAL COUNCIL

¶3. (C) Subhi al-Meshadani is one of two Iraqi Communist Party members elected to the Baghdad Provincial Council (PC) in January 2005, and is widely referred to as 'the only Sunni' on that body. Of the other 49 members of the PC, 28 are members of the ISCI/Badr Coalition, 11 are Da'wa, and 6 are Fadhila, the major Shia parties. A sprinkling of Kurds and independents (some Sadrist-aligned) round out the PC membership. The major Sunni political parties boycotted the 2005 elections and thus have no representation on the PC. It is important to note that PC members do not have any geographic constituencies; elected by a province-wide party-list vote, they are only beholden to their party leadership. Thus, Baghdad's Sunnis are doubly-disenfranchised. Not only do they not have any political representation on the PC (their own fault), they have nobody on the PC who specifically represents their geographical district (not their fault).

PUT IN CHARGE OF SERVICES FOR 'SUNNI' AREAS

¶4. (C) Subhi has served on the PC quietly for the past two years. He had no major committee assignments and was not involved in the Provincial Reconstruction Development Committee (PRDC) process, the primary forum for USG and PC interaction. In March of 2007, the PC announced that it was 'absorbing' the Regional Council, the political body made up of representatives from the outlying suburban 'qadas' (counties). This change created a more direct link between these areas and the Provincial Council, but to many it looked like a 'Shia' PC take-over of the 'Sunni' Regional Council.

Although the countryside does contain a mix of Sunni and Shia enclaves, Sunnis outnumber Shia in the qadas and most members of the Regional Council were Sunni. The PC made members of the old Regional Council members of the new Rural Services Committee of the PC, and named Subhi al-Meshadani the Committee Chairman.

¶ 15. (C) PC leadership claimed that their motives were non-sectarian; they sought to bring more unity to the local council system and to interact more directly with members of the qada councils. To prove their credibility, they were proud to tell PRToff that they appointed a Sunni (albeit a Communist) as chairman of this new committee.

¶ 16. (C) Over the past several months, Subhi oversaw the transition of the Regional Council into the Rural Services Committee. He began holding regular meetings with representatives with the qadas at the PC, and brokered a power-sharing arrangement between the PC and the leaders of the defunct Regional Council, incorporating them into the new committee's leadership structure.

MADE A PART OF THE GOVERNOR'S RECONCILIATION AGENDA

¶ 17. (C) Essential services for the qadas are provided through the office of the provincial Governor; the Rural Services Committee is the mechanism to provide political input to that office. Due to his role as Rural Services Committee chairman, Subhi serves as a direct link between the councils of the qadas and the Governor of Baghdad. Qada council members bring the concerns of their constituents to the Rural Services Committee, and then Subhi works with the Governor's staff to develop responses.

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¶ 18. (C) The Governor of Baghdad, Hussein al-Tahan (Badr), has recently embarked on a campaign of reconciliation (to be reported septel). He has visited tribal leaders and local council members in the outlying communities of Taji, Abu Ghraib and Mada'in (respectively, north, west and southeast of Baghdad). His reconciliation program involves bringing tribal elements into a relationship with security forces of the Coalition, MOI, and MOD, and identifying ways to improve government services for the residents of those outlying communities. He has brought Subhi along with him on several of these reconciliation trips. Subhi also served as the representative of provincial government during a United States Institute of Peace (USIP)-sponsored tribal outreach trip to Amman, Jordan. Subhi traveled with a delegation of key leaders from the Mahmoudiya area (south Baghdad) to engage in dialogue with senior Sunni tribal leaders based in Jordan.

FROM YOUTHFUL ACTIVIST TO ELDER STATESMAN

¶ 19. (C) Subhi told PRToff that he is content playing his part serving as a symbolic representative for Sunnis in Baghdad, but wishes it was his ideals, not his religious identity, that he was more known for. He is a product of the Iraqi intellectual class that desired the benefits of socialism, but abhorred the dictatorial tendencies of the Ba'ath Party. A fiery political agitator and dedicated communist, he served time in prison under Saddam for his dissenting views. He has a worldly air about him and freely discusses poetry, culture and travel in Europe. Asked about being a part of the Governor's reconciliation program, Subhi voiced his concerns about efforts to empower tribes. He has the intellectual's disdain for the rustic, and feels that it is merely a short-term fix that may end up hurting Iraq in the future*-but he is practical enough in his older years that he sees the utility in any strategy that limits the violence and destruction currently plaguing Baghdad.

POSTER CHILD OR POWER BROKER?

¶10. (C) COMMENT: The new-found role Subhi al-Meshadani plays in provincial politics illustrates many facets of the political dilemma facing Sunni residents of Baghdad province.

Sunnis lack a political voice (through the major Sunni political parties) on the Provincial Council due to their boycott of the 2005 elections. Because that body is not comprised of representatives from specific districts, Sunnis are also not geographic constituents of any member. Sunni political parties in the national parliament do not have the widespread support of Baghdad's Sunni population, according to PRT contacts, due to their lackluster performance. Others who claim to 'represent the Sunnis' in Baghdad, notably Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), have found it difficult to sell their strict, intolerant version of Islam to mainstream Sunni communities who also find these groups incapable of offering much in the way of improved services or social welfare that might make their politics more palatable. Tribal leaders fill a leadership gap for some Sunni areas, but few show interest in holding official political office. That leaves a gap for proxies, like Subhi al-Meshadani.

'A SUNNI WE CAN TRUST'

¶11. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Subhi largely delegates the running of the Rural Services Committee to the old Regional Council leaders, realizing that they have the political connections and the professional competence to manage the Committee's efforts. By his own admission, he is not the technical expert on the water pipes, electrical towers and road surfaces that need to be provided to suburban Baghdad. But he has worked tirelessly to broker meetings between disgruntled Sunni local council leaders, Coalition units, PRToffs and provincial government leaders to find solutions to the many problems faced by these outlying communities. With few resources being provided by the provincial government to the qadas, he faces criticism that he is merely being used by the PC's leadership to put a Sunni veneer over their Shia prejudices.

¶12. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Subhi is certainly in an unenviable position, placed as he is between largely disenfranchised Sunni communities and a predominantly Shia government. It is not yet clear whether he will be able to satisfy everybody. But reconciliation has to start

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somewhere, and Subhi, even if only a symbol, has been a key part of the recent progress in Baghdad. Asked why the Governor had included Subhi in his reconciliation efforts, the Governor's Chief of Staff said simply, "He is one of the few Sunnis we can trust." END COMMENT.
CROCKER